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Reducing NSA Mountains To Molehills

Of all the hush-hush government agencies in Washington, the National Security Agency keeps the lowest profile. It handles such unglamorous but supersensitive jobs as interpreting transmissions from spy satellites and decoding intercepted foreign communications.

Every day the agency produces veritable mountains of confidential, secret and top secret trash. NSA officials put the figure at "several tons" a day.

How to get rid of it? Obviously, the NSA can't simply pile its used secrets out on the sidewalk for the next trash pickup.

The NSA has its own disposal process, which is a tightly guarded secret. All that's known is that there are only a few "destruction officers" for the entire agency, and according to a Defense Department audit report they can't keep up with the output of secret documents.

So NSA poohbahs put out calls for volunteers. At any rate, the Pentagon audit found, "approximately 900 people responded, but only 300 actually volunteered once they were aware of the nature of the work to be performed."

Even with the lure of time-and-a-half overtime pay, the destruction work was evidently so grubby that the volunteers soon lost their stomach for it."

Not surprisingly, some of those who did stick it out were in the better-paying grades. Some of the volunteers were employes with annual salaries of more than $20,000, which meant that the agency was paying as much as $15.83 an hour for its overtime document destroyers.

This bothered the Pentagon auditors, who suggested that the NSA's overtime costs could be trimmed by at least $24,000 a year by using lower-salaried employes to collect and destroy the classified trash, and $22,000 by assigning lower grades to oversee the process.

The NSA did not challenge the validity of the auditors' conclusions. But agency officials did point out that it wasn't always possible to persuade lower-paid employes to volunteer for the trash disposal chore.

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